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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000045

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/10/2016

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MINISTER'S "THUGS" BEAT JOURNALIST AT  
ANTI-WAR PROTEST

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The BBC and several local independent news agencies reported that on January 9 a mob led by Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) Deputy Minister of Labor Mervyn Silva attacked participants at a peace rally in Colombo organized by the United People's Movement (UPM), an organization representing a range of opposition political parties, including the main opposition United National Party (UNP), leftist and Tamil parties. The mob severely beat Ajith Senaviratne, a journalist from the government-critical Ravaya ("Rumor") newspaper. The rally organizers and a confidential police source alleged that the order to disrupt the peace demonstration came from the Presidential Secretariat. End summary.

Mervyn's Mob

¶2. (C) On January 9 a mob led by Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) Deputy Minister of Labor Mervyn Silva attacked demonstrators at a peace rally in Colombo organized by the United People's Movement (UPM), according to credible media reports. The UPM represents a range of opposition political parties, including the main opposition United National Party (UNP), and socialist and Tamil parties, in support of political power sharing between Sinhalese and Tamil-speaking communities within a united Sri Lanka. The mob severely beat Ajith Senaviratne a journalist from the government-critical Ravaya ("Rumor") newspaper.

¶3. (C) United National Party (UNP) Member of Parliament Dayasiri Jayasekara, a co-founder of the UPM who took part in the peace rally, confirmed to Pol FSN on January 10 that he had witnessed Deputy Minister Silva at the demonstration "with well over 50 thugs attacking the rally participants." Deputy Minister Silva, an outspoken nationalist, has often disrupted peace rallies during the Chandrika Kumaratunga and Mahinda Rajapaksa Presidencies.

Police Inactive

¶4. (C) United People's Movement (UPM) and Civil Monitoring Committee (CMC) co-founder (and a Tamil Member of Parliament) Mano Ganesan told Pol FSN that Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader Rauff Hakeem and Tamil National Alliance MP Suresh Premachandran were preparing to address the rally when "a mob

of 150 persons led by Mervyn Silva arrived at the site of the meeting... and smashed the flags, stage and PA system all in the presence of journalists. We had advance information that our rally might be threatened and requested police protection, but the police arrived only after the mob had left." Ganesan added: "The mob attack shows the GSL is not serious about power sharing or a political solution. Mervyn would not do this on his own."

15. (C) A senior police officer (protect) confided to Pol FSN: "police received instructions from the Presidential Secretariat to stop the rally and to assault participants if

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they did not adhere to the police instructions to disband." The police source added that the Presidential Secretariat further instructed the police not to arrest the group led by Deputy Minister Silva. Local journalists told the BBC January 9 that "police did not arrive to prevent the attacks by about 100 thugs."

16. (C) COMMENT: The allegation from our police source linking the Presidential Secretariat to an order to permit the disruption of a peaceful political rally is disturbing. It is inconsistent with the government's pro- political solution message to the international community. Many of the participants came from the "reform" wing of the opposition UNP. The mission will raise our concerns with Acting Foreign Secretary DeSilva and seek an opportunity to do the same with

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the Presidential Secretariat. Septel will report on the likelihood of defections from other elements of the UNP to the government in the next few days.

BLAKE